

Classroom Techniques: Using Music in the Classroom

By Malgorzata Jedynak

Music is a manifestation of culture and of the human need to communicate. Because it is inextricably associated with language, using music in foreign language teaching is a good way of promoting speaking and of encouraging students to create mental fantasies.

Music has been used in classes in many ways and for different reasons, particularly in Suggestopedia (Lozanov 1978) through which music creates a relaxed learning environment for students. Music stimulates images for the inner eye, even in students who claim to have no imagination. Music promotes conversation because listeners may interpret the same piece of music differently. Music makes people act spontaneously, not only on a dance floor but also in a classroom.

This article describes some language classroom activities that use music. All these activities were introduced to two different age groups in a local language school in Poland.

What kind of music?

Many teachers wonder whether they should play pop and rock music or classical music. It is believed that most young people prefer the former and would reject the latter. But any music that evokes images or associations can be used. Teachers should accept students' negative responses to any music, because these are as important for language learning as positive ones. Thus, a student may learn to say, "This music is gloomy and horrible." Jazz and classical music are good choices, because they often do not have lyrics or words, unlike most pop and rock music. Words may actually distract students and limit their responses and interpretive images.

Before beginning

Before starting any music activity, teachers should be well prepared. They need to select music that fits the activity, particularly music that students can associate with certain cultures. Teachers may need to listen to many selections before finding the best one for an activity.

Teachers should choose shorter pieces and excerpts rather than longer ones. In this way they will have various kinds of music on the cassette tape which can be used for many different activities. Finding out more about the background of the music and the composer will help teachers prepare students for listening (Cranmer and Laroy 1992).

Teachers should never tell students the title of a particular piece of music before listening to it. Allowing each student to visualize the music without anybody's interpretation expands the student's images.

It is essential to have a good cassette recorder. Hi-fi equipment is better if available. If activities require photographs or reproductions of paintings, teachers should use them. Remember:

1. Teachers need to encourage students to participate in the class.
2. Music brings out unexpected talents, so teachers should try to give shy students, who may be more sensitive and feel the music more deeply, opportunities to express their ideas.
3. Also, since music may make students more relaxed, they may start fidgeting and talking with each other.

While playing the music, teachers should stay still so as not to distract students. Students will need moments of silence after listening, especially if they are writing comments about the music. All students' responses should be treated equally.

It is best not to correct students at the elementary level. Their responses to music tend to be spontaneous, unstructured, and frequently in the mother tongue. Teachers' corrections may cause them to not participate. However, when dealing with intermediate-level students, grammar and accuracy are more important.

Teachers can also use the same music with blind and partially deaf students. Students blind from birth cannot visualize easily but can feel the rhythm, so choose activities for them that do not require visualization. Partially deaf students can enjoy music as much as hearing students (Cranmer and Laroy 1992).

Activities

Most activities take from ten to thirty minutes. Some may be used as warm-up activities. These activities facilitate the introduction of new material but should be complemented with other activities that you usually use in your teaching. You should choose the appropriate activities according to the temperament of your class.

Creating an atmosphere

Background music can be used at elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels for the following purposes: to create a relaxed atmosphere in a class; to help students concentrate while reading a text; to mark a brief pause in the lesson before moving to another activity; or to break silence at the beginning of oral work done in pairs and groups. Stopping the music is a good way of bringing oral work to an end.

When teachers use background music, they need to check that it is not too loud and that it is not directed to only one part of the room. Singing tends to be distracting, so teachers can use instrumental music, nature sounds like bird songs, or sound effects like a crackling fire.

Expressing feelings

To help students create images and express feelings teachers should follow these steps. First, play the music and cut it off abruptly. Then encourage students to express how they felt while listening to it. A good way to do it is to ask them what colours or objects they associate with the music. My students' answers are rather creative. One said, "I felt like a lonely bird because the music was very sad." Another expressed his feelings by saying, "This music is blue for me because it reminds me of the sea and waves." Also ask students what the music makes them feel

like doing. Children can beat out the rhythm or move to the music. At the intermediate level music may promote discussions about students' experiences. For this activity, I suggest Mozart's "Lullaby."

Making up a story

Tell students not to open their eyes before they have listened to the entire musical selection. While the music is playing, quietly ask them questions such as "Where is it?" or "Who is there?" Also write a few key words related to the music before listening to it. For example, when students listen to Tchaikovsky's music, hints of a wizard, snow, a magic garden, a princess, and so forth will direct their thoughts to the world of fairy tales. After listening, invite them to share their interpretations with the class.

Using pictures with music

Slides, photographs, magazine pictures, and reproductions of painted portraits are useful aids. First, show a set of portraits to students. Then ask them to write down what distinguishes the three portraits from each other for example: physique, age, clothes, expression, position in society. After listening to three musical selections, students decide which portrait fits each piece of music and why. For example, I choose Mozart's "Lullaby" for a picture of a baby, Chopin's nocturnes for a portrait of a dignified old man, and Tchaikovsky's music for a picture of a ballerina.

I also show students a portrait of a composer, such as Edward Elgar, who wrote Enigma Variations, a series of character sketches of his friends and himself (Cranmer and Laroy 1992). After playing the music, I ask students in groups to guess what kind of person (e.g., profession, character, family status) he was describing in each sketch. Then the groups report what they thought. Afterward, I tell them about the composer. This activity is an excellent way to stimulate students' images and also allows students to learn about the great composers.

Weather in music

Write the word weather in the middle of the board and five lines radiating from it. Ask your students to write more words and phrases related to it. Then play the selected music and ask them to imagine the type of weather musically described in the piece. Divide the class into groups to discuss the scene and the weather they have visualized. I use a sounds of nature recording or any other music that is selected for meditation.

Conclusion

My university colleagues and I have been amazed by the reactions of our students after they listened to music. Nothing brings more joy to us than having shy and apathetic students participate in music activities. Using music gives students opportunities to become active creators of their own learning process (Blair 1982). One does not have to be a musician to appreciate music more profoundly and strengthen skills of English expression at the same time.

References

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